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Participatory news websites feature more opinion pieces

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Abstract

This study extends understanding of gatekeeping theory by analyzing news decisions in participatory journalism publishing. A content analysis examined top stories (N = 536) in eight cities by comparing professional newspaper story placement to its participatory competitor. While both products were intensely local, participatory stories were softer and more opinionated. Professional stories were rooted in traditional topics such as crime. The results suggest participatory journalism is a complement to local news rather than a replacement.

On September 25, 1690, Benjamin Harris put out the first issue of *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* [sic], a publication that had the distinction of being the first newspaper ever published in the American colonies.[1] This publication, intended to be a mainstay in the city of Boston but actually lasting only a day due to its unlicensed status,[2] consisted of four pages. The first three pages contained printed news produced by a paid writer, but the fourth page was intentionally left blank so that citizens could write down their own news and circulate it among those in their community.[3] Even in 1690 America, citizen content was intended to exist alongside professional news.

Historically, printing has been an expensive process. Because of that, professional editors have largely controlled what news is published and how prominently it is presented,[4] as the expense of paper and ink served as economic barriers to entry for citizens interested in producing news. Recent innovations in interactive media have begun to change this, as online publishing tools have greatly reduced the cost of publishing and thus opened up access.[5] A new class of editors has emerged, with this group responsible for publishing user-created news. As participatory journalism sites that publish content written by amateurs in communities across the United States have proliferated, the professional news industry has alternately competed with or co-opted user content.[6] Given that professional and amateur content operates side by side in communities across the U.S.,[7] the question becomes how different these products are. While both community newspaper sites and participatory journalism sites tend to be hyperlocal, little work has been done to understand what differences exist within these hyperlocal products.[8]

The purpose of this research is to understand how professional and participatory content is presented when professional editors serve as gatekeepers. This study examined online news products in eight U.S. communities by comparing the professional online newspaper and

participatory journalism sites serving these communities. At issue is how these sites differ on the type of news they construct (such as news vs. opinion), the local focus and the content categories that make up these products.

The questions explored here are important for two reasons. First, understanding these differences is important because of the discourse around participatory media. Some have worried that participatory products could replace, or at least attempt to replace, professional newspapers that serve their communities. To do so might require that these participatory products offer the same types of coverage in terms of breadth and topics. Second, these questions can help build theory as it pertains to gatekeeping by shedding light on the output of professional editors who make editorial decisions at user-centered publications. Much has been written about the professional journalist as gatekeeper, but little is understood about gatekeeping and participatory media.

Literature Review

Participatory journalism

Interactive media have turned the once-passive news consumer into a user-creator, and in aggregate this "former audience" is a participant in the news process.[9] What to call this phenomenon has morphed over the past 10 years from open-source journalism,[10] then user-generated content,[11] and then to citizen journalism.[12] This research will use the most modern of the terms, participatory journalism,[13] but the label matters less than the concept driving it. This new form of journalism is built on principles of being "participatory and user-centered" in its approach to publication.[14]

Participatory journalism's genesis can be linked to two specific innovations. The first was a

web application by Pyra Labs that allowed for an internal posting and messaging system. Intended to be an internal memo program for businesses, its creators quickly realized people were using it to write personal diaries and musings. The software was repackaged and launched in 1999 as a free program known as Blogger, the first blogging software. Blogger used a format that was mimicked by others and the back-end publishing system for blogs became what is known as a content-management system (CMS), which allowed people to create written posts or even entire publications using visual writing and editing dashboard tools.[15] The second innovation was the creation of Oh Yeon Ho in 2003, a news product in South Korea known as OhMyNews.com that used CMS tools to create an online publication. OhMyNews was the first known mass participatory journalism project of its kind, employing a group of professional editors who oversaw 800 citizen reporters at launch.[16] OhMyNews became a national phenomenon and then an international one, inspiring sites such as The Northwest Voice, MyMissourian and Bluffton Today to launch as some of the earliest forays into citizen journalism in the U.S.[17]

Understanding participatory journalism requires understanding its distinctive forms. The first factor is the institutional vs. individual form. Individuals can commit acts of participatory journalism on topics or events they care about by producing writing or video and publishing individual pieces on social networks.[18] The institutional option would be for individuals to publish news on institutional publications such as their own blogs, an independent news organization site, a site built around a niche topic or a professional site that houses user submissions.[19] The second factor to consider is the filtering involved in publication, as in whether publication is instant upon submission or whether the user must be verified before publication. Finally, a third factor is the level of professional standards required, such as whether material goes through a process to vet it for spelling and grammar at a basic level, or at a more extensive level such as fact-checking or

scanning for libel.[20] How these variables work together helps determine the type of participatory journalism publication one is examining. Early open participatory sites such as Metafilter or Kuro5hin applied few standards before publication,[21] while gatekeeping-driven journalism projects such as MyMissourian had rules for readability and sensitive content in place from launch.[22] Notions of professionalism and journalistic standards are at the heart of how participatory journalism has been incorporated into practice. News organizations have addressed worries about libel and uninteresting content by applying layers of editing to content, and few have taken up a model built on pure open publishing.[23]

Participatory journalism often is hyperlocal in focus, meaning it usually eschews national or regional coverage in favor of news taking place in close proximity to readers, and thus it is possible it shares some gatekeeping values when it comes to proximity.[24] Material sometimes springs from less-covered topics, though, with a greater emphasis on lifestyle news, recipes and personal stories or anecdotes that wouldn't have the same news value for a professional reporter.[25] How often this happens compared to professional journalism is unknown and indeed is the subject of this study. Carpenter's study looking broadly at participatory journalism content found more diversity in traditional topics and use of multimedia,[26] but that work differs from this current research in two crucial ways. First, Carpenter used a general national sample and did not make within-community comparisons, and thus the geographic source for participatory or professional journalism sites was not always the same for comparison purposes. Second, the topics analyzed in Carpenter's study were more akin to traditional news categories, which makes sense for a national study. Yet the literature has shown that citizens who are writing their own news tend to write about topics professionals would often ignore. Thus this research is an attempt to build on Carpenter's work by going deeper on topic categories as well as making within-community comparisons.

RQ_1: How do participatory journalism and professional journalism compare in terms of regional focus?

RQ_2: How do participatory journalism and professional journalism compare in terms of story types?

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping theory describes the way in which professional journalists control how ideas and information are disseminated.[27] These individuals are decision-makers tasked with reviewing content, shaping it and approving it before it is sent out to the consuming public. For news processes, gatekeeping usually consists of determining what stories will be used for publication, but it also consists of factors such as how stories are placed in publications to determine importance. Giving a story front-page status, a bigger headline or accompanying photos could be seen as giving it elevated prominence.[28] Thus gatekeeping has two practical functions: it controls what news is disseminated, and it controls how it is disseminated.

Gatekeeping has been studied in a variety of ways, such as from an institutional perspective that looks at routines, norms and processes that have an impact on publication[29] or outcomes that look at the product of those decisions.[30] For example, past work has shown gatekeepers use story factors such as timeliness, impact on the readership population, locality and conflict to help determine what is important.[31] All of these factors and processes are in aggregate the basis on which an editor gatekeeper makes judgments about a story. The result of this gatekeeping process is a "transfer of salience" whereby the product, the sum total of those decisions, helps consumers determine the most important and pressing news of the day.[32]

The lower barriers to self-publishing have changed the nature of how scholars think about

the gatekeeping process. Participatory journalism is an alternative to the traditional gatekeeper process in that the professional journalist is not the sole filter on what the consumer reads.[33] Instead, participatory journalism allows consumers to be participants in the process of news-making, producing content across platforms on topics they care about.[34] The editor in open-publishing systems who makes use of minimal standards has become a "gatewatcher" rather than a gatekeeper in that his or her job is less about controlling what is published and more about determining how much prominence it receives.[35] On some participatory sites, the gatekeeping filter role has shifted to the audience much as content production has. Similar to how open-source software development works, the former audience is working together to come up with standards for what is important and prominent.[36] This can take the form of algorithms, which apply computerized formulas based on browsing patterns, most-e-mailed stories or stories with the most comments.[37] Other sites use collective "crowd wisdom" in which all users have the ability to vote for stories they think should have more prominence, such as the models employed by Slashdot or Reddit.[38]

Much scholarship has been done on the content of participatory journalism[39] but none has looked specifically at the results when there is a gatekeeper involved. Most of the work has revolved around the freedom of self-publishing, but the question driving this study is what happens when self-publishing meets the editorial standards that come with having a professional journalist review content before it is disseminated. It seems clear that the seed content will be different, but when professional editors are involved will they elevate particular types of stories whether the writer is a professional or community citizen?

RQ_3: How do editorial decisions about participatory content differ from professional news content in terms of story categories?

Method

Content analysis

This study employed content analysis in order to compare the presentation of participatory journalism content and professionally produced content by examining four online newspaper sites in the United States. In order to ensure that there was geographic diversity, two sites were chosen from each of the four time zones in the United States, although Alaska and Hawaii were excluded because they are the only states in their own time zones. Sites were picked by using a custom search on the Knight Community News Network list of citizen media sites.[40] The search engine allows users to narrow criteria, and in this case the query used asked for all participatory journalism sites in the U.S. that are currently being published and have paid editors. The search yielded a list of 264 potential sites. From the list of those sites that qualified, two sites were chosen at random from each of the four time zones, one from the northern half of the time zone and one from the southern half, and those eight sites served as the participatory journalism sites used in this analysis. From there, the participatory journalism product in each city was paired with the most prominent professional news organization from that city using circulation data as a guide.

The front page of each news site served as the unit of analysis for both the professional and participatory site pairings for each of the eight cities. The 16 sites chosen were examined over a 56-day period. In order to make sure that the pages were indexed at the same time every day, HTML pages were downloaded from each site's front page and participatory journalism page at 5 p.m. each day using a software utility to download the HTML source files and accompanying images. The pages were captured and downloaded for each of the 56 days. The

material gathered allowed for eight weeks and thus eight downloads for each day of the week. Four downloads were chosen at random from the pool of eight for each day of the week, resulting in 28 days' worth of content that was evenly distributed across each day of the week. Those randomly selected dates then were analyzed and assembled as a constructed month.

All 16 sites chosen used layout techniques that presented general news content on top of the page in the form of a top story and assorted links that generally were unrelated other than their placement on the page. Elsewhere on the page were lists or sections of topic categories such as sports or lifestyle news. In order to examine gatekeeping choices for each page, the section of the page with the top story and top news links was the only part of each page used in this study, and coders were given a screenshot of each page's layout in order to know how to find the top stories section in each design. The top stories area included the top story (denoted by the main headline on the page) as well as the list of other main content. The number of top stories varied across publications based on design limitations. When following the link for each story within the top-news section, the coders examined the accompanying headline and text as well as any photo or video material that was published with the story.

Variables

Coders entered information for each story across different categories. First, the coders noted the name of the publication and then the headline of the story. Then they began coding the different variables used to answer the research questions. The first variable coded was site type and consisted of two levels. The first level was participatory journalism, defined as content from one of the preselected user-generated media sites. The second level was professional journalism, defined as content from one of the preselected professional news sites. This variable was used as the primary sorting variable used to answer the three research questions.

The second variable considered was the geographic focus of the story. All levels of this variable (local, state/regional, national, international) were considered relative to the audience most affected by the news. Local stories focused on impact on local audiences, state/regional stories focused on a wider non-national geographic area, national stories were about impact on the U.S. as a whole and international stories had global impact.

The third variable coded was the story type, defined as how the story was written and coded as general news, opinion or analysis. News stories were defined as an attempt at objective reporting built around facts and with no reporter assertions or opinions. Opinion stories were built almost entirely around the author's opinion and used facts in order to bolster the main point or opinion of the author. Analysis stories were explanatory pieces, combining facts with explanations or assertions about what is true or not based on evidence. The critical difference this last level had from opinion pieces is that the author's opinion was not clear and there was no conclusion that attempted to persuade the reader about what to believe.

The final variable coded was content category. Based on past work that examined content categories, several starter topics were considered[41] and then narrowed so that the categories could be compact and represent genuine differences in the analysis. For example, news about health, gardening and parenting was coded as lifestyle news. Another category, community life, contained stories that were profiles about people or events that did not fit one of the other categories; for example, a story about somebody retiring after 50 years on the job in a community would be a community life story, but if they were the principal at a school it would be coded as education. Other content categories included politics (stories about government institutions, legislation, events or trends related to public policy or elections), local public safety (news related to police, fire department or traffic issues), disasters and accidents (stories related

to natural disasters), business/economy (events or trends related to personal finance, job data or career information), sports (stories about games, teams, athletes or competition), arts and entertainment (stories about trends, people or news in television, movies, theater, music or other forms of art), religion and values (stories about faith, ethics or spirituality), science and technology (stories about scientific research, progress, technological advances or products) and education (stories about K-12, college, post-secondary learning or schools).

In all, 536 stories were coded by two people. The two coders first selected 110 stories, which represented more than 20 percent of the total sample, and coded them in order to test for intercoder reliability using Scott's Pi. Intercoder agreement was 0.93 on geographic focus and 0.88 on story type, which was above the 0.8 threshold accepted considered valid when using Scott's Pi for content analysis.[42] Initial assessment of the content category variable found a Scott's Pi value of 0.77. After discussion and small changes to the codebook that resulted in the more clear definitions detailed in the previous paragraph, 30 additional stories were coded and intercoder agreement was 0.89.

Results

Of the 536 stories coded for this study, 256 of them were professional journalism stories (47.8 percent of the sample) and 280 were participatory journalism stories (52.2 percent).

RQ_1 asked about regional focus differences between participatory journalism and professional journalism. Chi-square analysis found significant differences within the professional journalism and participatory factors as well as small differences between them, $\chi^2(4, N = 536) = 26.32$, $p < .01$. There was a highly local orientation on sites of both types toward news that was elevated to top news status, consistent with what might be expected for a community news site.

Within professional journalism's sample, 252 of the 256 stories were local stories (98.4 percent) whereas for participatory journalism local news accounted for 250 of its 280 stories (89.3 percent). Between these two factors, there was a slight difference on national news focus, as participatory journalism accounted for 83.3 percent of stories that were national in nature (10 stories compared to two for professional journalism). While the raw totals are so small for each category that the differences remain small relative to the more meaningful finding about local news orientation, it is noteworthy. Further analysis showed that all 10 national participatory journalism stories also were opinion pieces, whereas the two professional stories that were national were general news stories.

Thus it can be said that gatekeeper editors at both participatory and professional publications tend to favor local stories, but at participatory publications they are more likely to elevate nationally focused opinion stories to top-news status.

RQ_2 asked about differences in story types between participatory journalism and professional journalism. Chi-square analysis found significant differences between the two factors, $\chi^2(2, N = 536) = 70.80$, $p < .01$. The differences were found in the split between general news and opinion, as 59.7 percent of the 355 general news stories were contained on the professional news site. On the other hand, the participatory journalism site accounted for 83.9 percent of the opinion pieces (104 of the 124 stories). Within each level, the picture also differs. General news accounted for 82.8 percent of professional journalism stories featured on the front page, whereas for participatory sites it was 51.1 percent for news and 37.1 percent for opinion. The picture that emerges here is that professional site gatekeeper editors are more likely to feature general news compared to their participatory counterparts, whereas the latter is more likely to feature opinion pieces. While participatory journalism isn't solely the domain of opinion, editors are much more

likely to give it status.

RQ_3 asked about differences in story categories between participatory journalism and professional journalism. Chi-square analysis found significant differences between the two factors, $\chi^2(9, N = 536) = 305.98$, $p < .01$. Professional journalism gatekeepers tended to elevate more stories about politics (80.6 percent of 62 stories), local public safety (95.7 percent of 116 stories), business (all 21 stories), religion (72.2 percent of 18 stories) and science and technology (all 10 of the stories). On the other hand, participatory journalism gatekeepers elevated more stories about sports (76.7 percent of 30 stories), lifestyle (94.0 percent of 83 stories) and community life (86.1 percent of 144 stories). The results (Table 1) show that professional journalism gatekeepers tend to play up stories centered on some of the more traditional hard-news topics as well as stories about religion and technology. Participatory journalism gatekeepers were elevating soft topics such as lifestyle news and sports as well as community life stories. Recall that community life stories are features about people or activities that have no obvious traditional news hook. This means 44.3 percent of the participatory journalism stories are topics of this sort, representing a different conception of news judgment.

Discussion

This study builds theory in the area of gatekeeping by helping describe the role of the participatory journalism editor. If the gatekeeper's job is to make decisions about what stories to elevate to prominence in order to transfer salience to consumers, the results indicate participatory journalism gatekeepers are making different choices. This sheds new light on the content represented by participatory journalism. A top story on participatory journalism websites is journalism of a different kind compared to what the professionals produce and publish, driven by

a different set of editorial values.

Consider that the most significant finding in this research is how gatekeepers at participatory and professional news organizations handle story topics. The professional sites featured more content that was hard news in nature (traditional front-page news topics such as politics and public safety accounted for 62.9 percent of its content). Participatory content mostly ignored that content in favor of softer forms of news such as lifestyle and community profiles and event coverage that had almost no traditional news hook. Community life stories accounted for almost 45 percent of participatory content and represents a nontraditional type of news not often found in professional publications. The traditional factors that drive news selection for gatekeepers such as proximity, timeliness, impact or prominent figures are seen less in the top stories generated by citizen producers.

In addition, opinion content is much more likely to be featured on participatory journalism sites compared to what gatekeepers elevate on professional journalism sites. The professional journalism content tends to represent the content that one might expect to see on a news website, as it has a steady diet of hard news mixed with a few opinion and analysis pieces. Participatory content is much more weighted in terms of opinion and analysis and emphasizes voices over an assemblage of stories driven by facts alone.

It appears plain from these results that participatory journalism is not attempting to become a replacement for professional journalism, at least in the sense that it would cover all of the topics, events and issues professionals cover. It is of course possible that coverage of politics and local public safety exists on these participatory sites and the editors simply are exercising different gatekeeping choices to elevate other types of stories. On the other hand, it might be that the editors are inclined to publish based on professional news value standards but they don’t

have the material to do so consistently. While the results of this study are based on gatekeeping output, understanding the deliberations and processes the editors go through as well as the pool of content they have to work with would be a good direction for future research and add to the knowledge gained from this study.

While there are differences, it is important to remember the similarities. True to the descriptions often made about these sites, participatory journalism products are intensely local just like their professional newspaper counterparts. Other than some occasional commentary on national politics, the vast majority of stories produced on these citizen-driven sites is about local news, issues, events and people. While the content might take different forms, this dedication to local news is a shared ideal for both professional and participatory journalism sites.

There are practical implications for this study. First, understanding these differences helps us better understand the competitive landscape taking shape in cities where professional and user-generated content sites are competing with one another. Perhaps participatory content won't replace journalism, and perhaps it is competing for a different set of readers, but knowing how it differs and understanding what is attracting readers is a worthy pursuit to those operating community newspaper sites. On the other hand, what these results don't show are site-wide differences. By examining gatekeeping choices we are examining the role the editor plays. A site-wide content study might find equal amounts of coverage on all topics, or at least more balanced results. Future research can further shed light on these content differences. Finally, understanding the large role community life stories play on participatory sites is a potential window into other types of stories that readers want, ones that don't have traditional news hooks but are interesting to readers nonetheless. This is useful for professional journalists looking to find stories that people want to consume.

As with any study, this research has limitations. The results are the product of gatekeeping output, looking at choices made by editors through the lens of the product on the page. Thus one cannot infer the process by which those choices are made, and further study should be done to investigate that side of the production process. Additionally, this research compares the work of gatekeeping professionals but as noted in the literature, participatory journalism can take many forms. The choices made about what to publish on amateur independent sites, social media and local blogs might well vary when the gatekeeper is a volunteer interested in niche topics or ideas.

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Table 1

Crosstabs of content category sorted by professional journalism websites and participatory journalism websites (*N* = 536).

Category	Professional (% of total)	Participatory (% of total)
Politics	50 (80.6%)	12 (19.4%)
Public Safety	111 (95.7%)	5 (4.3%)
Business/Economy	21 (100%)	0 (0.0%)
Sports	7 (23.3%)	23 (76.7%)
Religion/Values	13 (72.2%)	5 (27.8%)
Science/Technology	10 (100%)	0 (0.0%)
Lifestyle	5 (6.0%)	78 (94.0%)
Education	9 (39.1%)	14 (60.9%)
Arts/Entertainment	10 (34.5%)	19 (6.5%)
Community Life	20 (13.9%)	124 (86.1%)
Total	**256**	**280**